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ADVANCE

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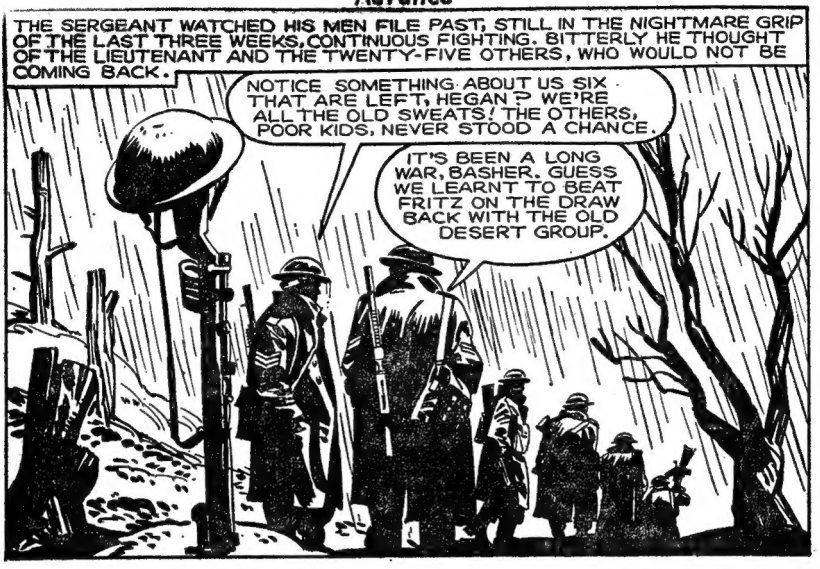
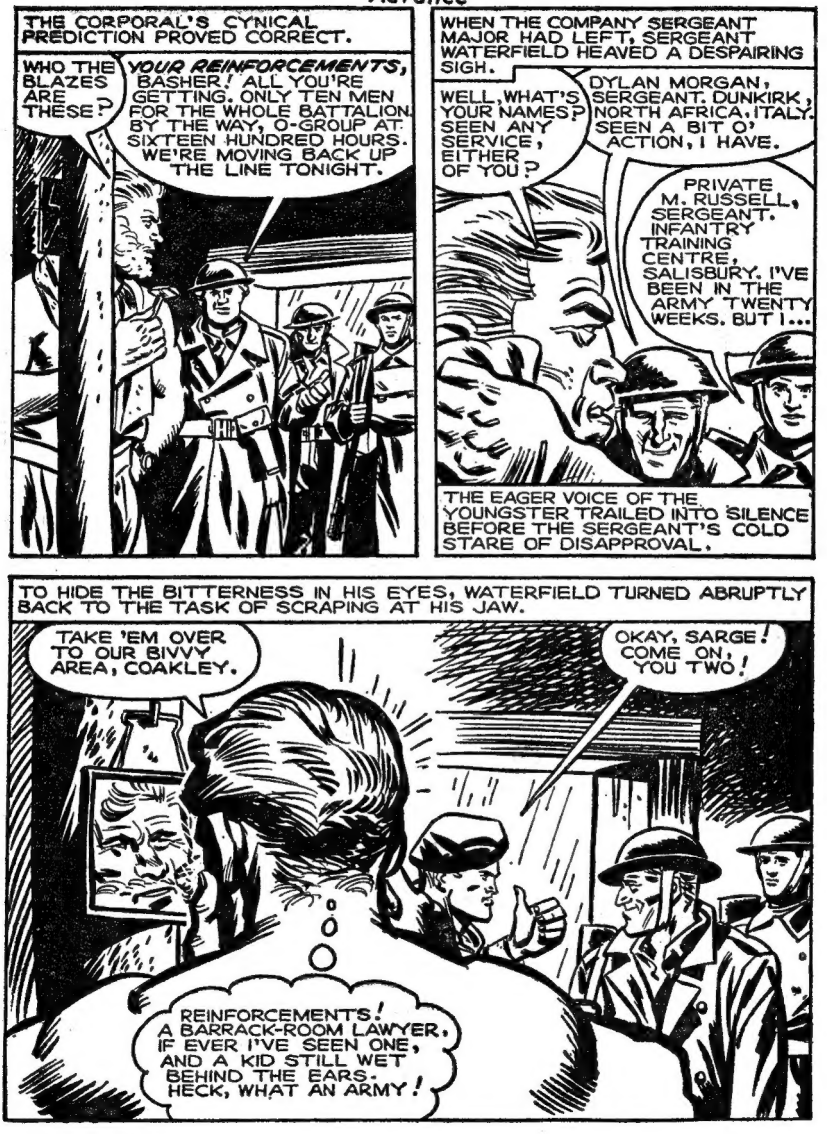
Chapter 1. The Valiant Few

THE DIN OF BATTLE STILL RANG IN SERGEANT WATERFIELD'S EARS EVEN THOUGH THE GUNS WERE NOW SILENT. HE STARED WITH BLOOD-SHOT EYES AT A DESPATCH RIDER WHO HAD HALTED CLOSE BY.

AS THE RIDER PLOUGHED OFF THROUGH THE MUD, FIVE GAUNT FIGURES DETACHED THEMSELVES FROM THE SODDEN EARTH.


THE SERGEANT WATCHED HIS MEN FILE PAST, STILL IN THE NIGHTMARE GRIP OF THE LAST THREE WEEKS, CONTINUOUS FIGHTING. BITTERLY HE THOUGHT OF THE LIEUTENANT AND THE TWENTY-FIVE OTHERS, WHO WOULD NOT BE COMING BACK.
NOTICE SOMETHING ABOUT US SIX THAT ARE LEFT, HEGAN? WE'RE ALL THE OLD SWEATS! THE OTHERS, POOR KIDS, NEVER STOOD A CHANCE.
IT'S BEEN A LONG WAR, BASHER. GUESS WE LEARNT TO BEAT FRITZ ON THE DRAW BACK WITH THE OLD DESERT GROUP.

WHEN THEY REACHED THE BATTALION REST AREA, TAUT NERVES SLOWLY UNWOUND.
HERE WE ARE, MATES, SOCKS, GREY WOOLLEN, FOR THE USE OF. RUMOUR FLOATIN' ROUND IS, WE'VE DONE OUR LITTLE BIT. GOING TO SHIP US BACK TO THE U.K.
I SHOULD COCOA! THEY'LL LUMBER US WITH A BUNCH OF ROOKIES AN' WE'LL BE CHASING JERRY BACK OVER THE RHINE. YOU MARK MY WORDS!
ONLY FIGHTING I WANT IS IN A NAAFI QUEUE IN ALDERSHOT.


THE CORPORAL'S CYNICAL PREDICTION PROVED CORRECT.
WHO THE BLAZES ARE THESE?
YOUR REINFORCEMENTS, BASHER! ALL YOU'RE GETTING. ONLY TEN MEN FOR THE WHOLE BATTALION. BY THE WAY, O-GROUP AT SIXTEEN HUNDRED HOURS. WE'RE MOVING BACK UP THE LINE TONIGHT.
WHEN THE COMPANY SERGEANT MAJOR HAD LEFT, SERGEANT WATERFIELD HEAVED A DESPAIRING SIGH.
WELL, WHAT'S YOUR NAMES? SEEN ANY SERVICE, EITHER OF YOU?
DYLAN MORGAN, SERGEANT. DUNKIRK, NORTH AFRICA, ITALY. SEEN A BIT O' ACTION, I HAVE.
PRIVATE M. RUSSELL, SERGEANT. INFANTRY TRAINING CENTRE, SALISBURY. I'VE BEEN IN THE ARMY TWENTY WEEKS. BUT I...
THE EAGER VOICE OF THE YOUNGSTER TRAILED INTO SILENCE BEFORE THE SERGEANT'S COLD STARE OF DISAPPROVAL.
TO HIDE THE BITTERNESS IN HIS EYES, WATERFIELD TURNED ABRUPTLY BACK TO THE TASK OF SCRAPING AT HIS JAW.
TAKE 'EM OVER TO OUR BIVVY AREA, COAKLEY.
OKAY, SARGE! COME ON, YOU TWO!
REINFORCEMENTS! A BARRACK-ROOM LAWYER, IF EVER I'VE SEEN ONE, AND A KID STILL WET BEHIND THE EARS. HECK, WHAT AN ARMY!

YOUNG MICK RUSSELL FELT DESPERATELY ALONE AMONG THESE HARD-FACED MEN. THE DULL MUTTER OF DISTANT GUNS DID NOTHING TO EASE THE FEAR THAT NIGGLED AT THE PIT OF HIS STOMACH.

WITH SUDDEN EARTH-SHAKING SOUND, A FLIGHT OF TYPHOONS SCREAMED LOW OVERHEAD. UTTERING AN INVOLUNTARY SHOUT OF ALARM, MICK FLUNG HIMSELF FORWARD IN THE THICK MUD.

UNIFORM COVERED WITH FARMYARD MUD, MICK LOOKED UP SHAKILY TO FACE THE BROAD GRINS OF THE VETERANS.
THAT'S TAKEN THE CREASES OUT O' YOUR GREATCOAT, SON.
!...! ER THOUGHT THEY WERE ENEMY...
RELAX, KID. AIN'T BEEN A SMELL OF THE LUFTWAFFE FOR DAYS NOW. YOU'LL SOON GET TO KNOW THE SOUND O' JERRY ENGINES.
FACE STILL CRIMSON WITH EMBARRASSMENT, MICK SWUNG ROUND AS THE HARSH VOICE OF THE SERGEANT CUT SHORT THE ROUGH LAUGHTER.
CUT THE CACKLE! WE MOVE UP THE LINE AT LAST LIGHT. SEE YOUR WEAPONS ARE IN GOOD SHAPE. PASS THE WORD, YOU LOT! HOW OLD ARE YOU, SON?
WELL--ER-- EIGHTEEN, SERGEANT. I'M SORRY !....
EIGHTEEN! JUST ANOTHER GREEN KID THAT WOULD END UP AS CANNON FODDER. THE SERGEANT'S FACE DARKENED.
DON'T LET THIS BUNCH OF ROUGHNECKS THROW YOU, KID. UP HERE THERE'S ONLY THE QUICK AND THE DEAD...
YES, SERGEANT, I'LL DO MY BEST!

MICK'S SHOULDERS DROOPED AS HE WATCHED THE BURLY FIGURE OF THE SERGEANT STRIDE AWAY. THEN A QUIET, SYMPATHETIC VOICE SPOKE AT HIS ELBOW.
YOU'LL BE OKAY, YOUNG 'UN. BETTER GET THAT MUCK OFF YOUR COAT AN' WE'LL SEND MOST OF YOUR CLOBBER BACK TO 'B' ECHELON. CAN'T GO INTO ACTION LOADED LIKE A PACK MULE.
HE MUST THINK I'M JUST A DEAD LOSS. MAYBE I AM AT THAT!

PRIVATE DAI MORGAN, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAD THE OLD SOLDIER'S ABILITY TO MAKE HIMSELF AT HOME IN ANY BILLET.
NICE COMFY LITTLE PLACE THIS, CORPORAL. ALL THESE HILLS AROUND. REMINDS ME O' BACK HOME. WAKE ME UP WHEN THE BATTLE'S OVER, WILL YOU?
ON YOUR FEET, SOLDIER. GET THESE GRENADES PRIMED UP~~ AND LOOK SLIPPY ABOUT IT.
GRENADES
AS THE CORPORAL HURRIED OFF, MORGAN CONTINUED TO RELAX. HE HAD NOT BEEN KNOWN AS "EXCUSED BOOTS, DAI" IN HIS LAST UNIT FOR NOTHING.

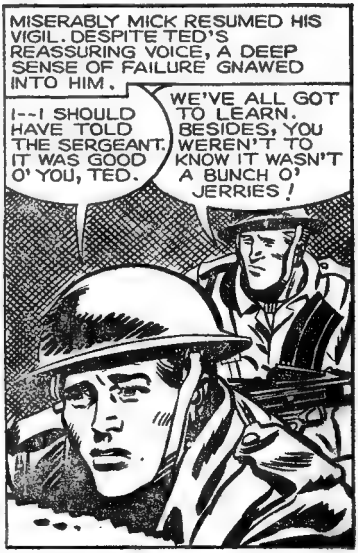
IN THE COLD JANUARY NIGHT, THE BATTALION MOVED UP TO FORWARD POSITIONS. FOR THE FIRST TIME MICK RUSSELL FOUND HIMSELF STARING OUT ACROSS THE COLD HOSTILITY OF NO MAN'S LAND. HE WAS GLAD HE SHARED THE WATCH IN THE FRIENDLY COMPANY OF TED BATCHELOR.
HAVE A GOOD EMBARKATION LEAVE, MICK?
DIDN'T TAKE IT -- HADN'T ANYWHERE TO GO REALLY.
SUDDENLY, IN THOSE QUIET SILENT HOURS OF THE NIGHT, MICK FOUND HIMSELF BLURTING OUT A TALE OF LONELINESS THAT HAD BEEN PENT UP INSIDE HIM FOR TOO LONG.
I'M AN ORPHAN. NEVER KNEW MY MUM OR DAD. THEY FOUND ME IN RUSSELL STREET, BOW. THAT'S HOW I GOT MY NAME. I--I WANT TO MAKE GOOD IN THE ARMY, TED! YOU SEE, IT'S THE ONLY HOME I'VE GOT.
NOT TO WORRY, MICK. I'LL SHOW YOU THE ROPES. THE---
SOMETHING HAD MOVED OUT IN THE DARKNESS. WITH TREMBLING FINGERS, MICK THREW THE CATCH OF THE GUN TO AUTOMATIC FIRE.
THERE'S SOMETHING MOVING OUT THERE, ALL RIGHT!

FOR SECONDS MICK FROZE WITH HORROR, HIS MOUTH DRY. THEN HE SAW THEM, DARK OMINOUS FIGURES -- COMING STRAIGHT TOWARDS HIM.
HIS FINGERS CLOSED ROUND THE TRIGGER. A BURST OF LIQUID TRACER LACED THE AIR.

NEXT MOMENT, A STUNNING BLOW SENT HIM REELING INTO THE BOTTOM OF THE SLIT TRENCH. A RAUCOUS AMERICAN VOICE SNARLED OUT OF THE DARKNESS.
CUT IT OUT, MICK! THEY'RE YANKS!
WHAT THE SAM HILL P HECK! QUIT THE SHOOTIN, WILL YER!

AN INFURIATED AMERICAN LIEUTENANT AND AN ANGRY SERGEANT REACHED THE LISTENING POST AT THE SAME TIME.
WHAT THE HECK? YOU'VE GOT THE WHOLE BATTALION STOOD-TO NOW.
IT WAS MY...
SORRY, BASHER! MY MISTAKE!
YOU GUYS SURE ARE TRIGGER-HAPPY. SOMEBODY MIGHT'VE GOT HURT!

THE SERGEANT FIXED A SUSPICIOUS GAZE ON TED.
NOT LIKE YOU TO GET JUMPY, TED?
I'VE SAID I'M SORRY. WHAT D'YOU WANT ME TO DO, BURST INTO TEARS!
FORGET IT, BOYS ~~ NO HARM DONE! WE SHOULDN'T HAVE GONE SWANNING IN THROUGH THIS SECTOR OF THE LINE. KIND O' LOST OUR BEARINGS...


MISERABLY MICK RESUMED HIS VIGIL. DESPITE TED'S REASSURING VOICE, A DEEP SENSE OF FAILURE GNAWED INTO HIM.
I--I SHOULD HAVE TOLD THE SERGEANT. IT WAS GOOD O' YOU, TED.
WE'VE ALL GOT TO LEARN. BESIDES, YOU WEREN'T TO KNOW IT WASN'T A BUNCH O' JERRIES!

WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN THE ARDENNES, THE BRITISH AND CANADIAN ARMIES STRUCK NORTH TOWARDS THE RHINE.
YOU WILL! WE'RE HEADING STRAIGHT FOR 'EM, BOY. THE WHOLE DIV. IS ON THE MOVE. THAT MEANS ONE THING, WE'RE GOING TO TAKE A SMACK AT CROSSING THE RHINE.
FUNNY, REALLY! I'VE BEEN UP THE LINE THREE DAYS, AND I HAVEN'T SEEN A GERMAN OR HEARD A SHOT FIRED IN ANGER.
DEUTSCH

FOR THREE DAYS THE CONVOYS GROUND ALONG THE MUD-CAKED ROADS. THEN, AT LAST, WEARY, STIFF-LEGGED MEN DISMOUNTED. SERGEANT WATERFIELD CALLED HIS PLATOON TOGETHER...
FROM HERE ON, IT'S FOOTSLOGGING. JERRY'S PULLED BACK. OUR JOB IS TO PROBE FORWARD AND MAKE CONTACT. CORPORAL HEGAN, ISSUE OUT AS MUCH AMMUNITION AS EACH MAN CAN CARRY. WE MOVE OFF IN HALF-AN-HOUR.
OKAY, BASHER!

THEY MOVED THROUGH A DESOLATE COUNTRYSIDE THAT STILL BORE THE LIVID SCARS OF BITTER FIGHTING.
ALL STATIONS FOX ONE. ADVANCE. WILL HALT ON BLACKPOOL RIDGE. REPEAT, HALT ON BLACKPOOL RIDGE...OVER.

AS POINT SECTION, THE MEN OF THREE PLATOON WERE THE FIRST TO REACH THE RIDGE WITH THE CODE NAME BLACKPOOL.
THE MAP SHOWS A JERRY SCHLOSS UP AHEAD, TED. THE COLONEL WANTS TO KNOW IF IT'S CLEAR O' JERRIES. TAKE MORGAN AND YOUNG RUSSELL WITH YOU. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.
SURE THING, SARGE. WE'D BETTER LOOK SNAPPY IF WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT 'FORE DARK.

THE THREE MEN SET OUT DOWN THE EERILY SILENT WOODED SLOPES OF THE VALLEY.
SHOVE A ROUND UP THE SPOUT, AND PUT YOUR SAFETY CATCH OFF. KEEP YOUR EYES PEELED, SON! WE COULD BOUNCE 'EM ANY TIME NOW.
RIGHT, TED.
NOT A LIVE JERRY FOR MILES, IF YOU ASK ME. ALL GONE BACK OVER THE RHINE.

FOR OVER AN HOUR THEY ADVANCED CAUTIOUSLY UNTIL, AT LAST, THE OLD CASTLE STOOD GAUNT AND BLACK AGAINST THE SKYLINE.
WHAT DID I TELL YOU, MAN? NOT A SIGN O' LIFE!
LOOKS QUIET ENOUGH. TIME'S GETTING ON. WE'LL MAKE A QUICK SHUFTI ROUND AND HEAD BACK.

MICK MADE A NERVOUS ATTEMPT TO CONQUER THE COLD FEAR THAT CLUTCHED AT HIM. IMPETUOUSLY, HE LUNGED FORWARD AT THE GREAT OAK DOORWAY.
NO NEED TO GO LOOKING FOR TROUBLE, MICK. BACK UP AGAINST THE WALL, BOTH OF YOU!
I--I'LL GO FIRST, TED!

WITH A FEW SLASHES WITH HIS BAYONET, TED BATCHELOR HACKED DOWN A STURDY BRANCH OF A TREE. THEN HE CAREFULLY PRODDED AT THE MASSIVE DOORWAY UNTIL IT GROANED OPEN ON ITS ANCIENT HINGES.
THERE WAS A BLINDING FLASH ~~ AND THE DOORWAY DISSOLVED IN A MASS OF SPLINTERED TIMBER AND CRUMBLING MASONRY.

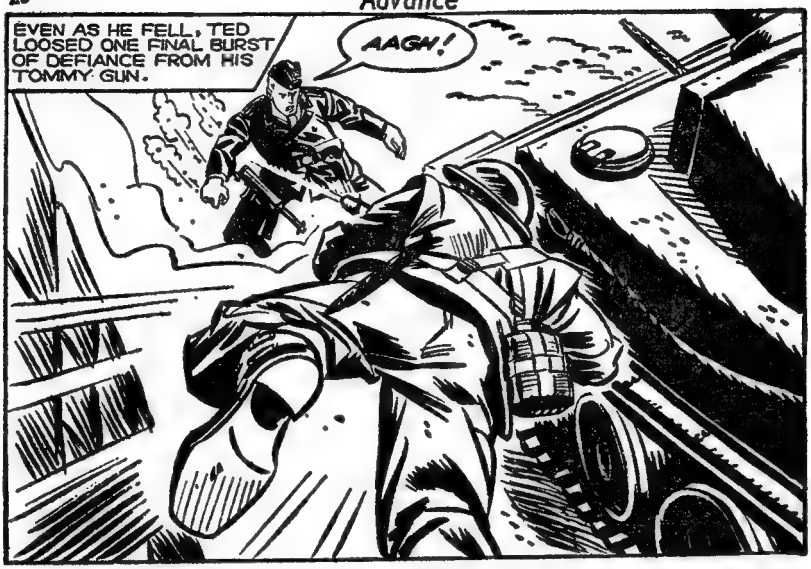
YOUNG RUSSELL'S MOUTH WENT DRY, HIS VOICE HARDLY A CROAK.
THAT--- THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN MY LOT!
ANOTHER LITTLE LESSON FOR YOU, MICK. JERRY IS FOND O' LEAVING SOUVENIRS BEHIND. THERE'S NO SECOND CHANCES IN THIS GAME!
SAVE US RINGING THE DOORBELL, ANYWAY.

WARILY THEY ENTERED THE GREAT, GLOOMY HALL. THEIR VOICES ECHOED BACK FROM THE DAMP WALLS.
CHEERFUL PLACE FOR A FUNERAL, ISN'T IT! IT'S GLAD I'LL BE TO BE OUT OF HERE.
NO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT ANY MORE BOOBY-TRAPS. WE'RE THE FIRST IN THIS DUMP FOR YEARS. COME ON. WE'LL SEE WHAT IT'S LIKE FOR AN O.P. ON THE ROOF.

A CARPET OF DUST DEADENED THE HEAVY TREAD OF THEIR BOOTS AS THEY CLIMBED THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE OF THE NORTH TURRET. THEY REACHED THE THIRD ~~ THEN...
WHAT WAS THAT ?
SOMETHING'S OUTSIDE! WE MIGHT JUST BE ABLE TO SEE~~ GOOD GRIEF!
MY OATH! A TIGER!
QUICK, DOWNSTAIRS, BOTH O' YOU!
LET'S SCRAM WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME!

AS THEY CLAMMERED DOWN THE STAIRWAY TO THE FIRST FLOOR, THEY HEARD THE PANZER GRIND TO A HALT. THE GLINT OF BATTLE WAS IN TED'S EYE ...
LEAVE IT BE, MAN! THEY'LL BLOW US TO KINGDOM COME.
THEY'VE OPENED THE HATCHES, IT'S A SITTING DUCK! WE'LL NEVER GET ANOTHER CHANCE LIKE THIS. GIVE ME A COUPLE O' GRENADES -- QUICK!
SWIFTLY, MICK HANDED OVER THE TWO DEADLY MILLS BOMBS.
STAND BY TO GIVE COVERING FIRE -- JUST IN CASE.
SUICIDE IT IS! COME ON, MICK, RUN FOR IT!
NO! I'M STICKING WITH TED!
AT SUCH SHORT RANGE, TED BATCHELOR COULD NOT MISS. A GRENADE DROPPED NEATLY INTO EACH OPEN CUPOLA OF THE NAZI TANK.
TEUFEL! ENGLANDER!

FOR LONG PETRIFIED SECONDS, THE BRITISH AND GERMANS STARED AT EACH OTHER. THE GRENADES HAD NOT EXPLODED! THEN THE SPELL BROKE.
ELEVATE THE GUN, YOU FOOLS! FEUER! FEUER!
THE GERMAN TANK COMMANDER'S SCHMEISSER RAKED THE APERTURE WITH HOT LEAD.
I'M GETTING OUT!
TED!
AAGH!


EVEN AS HE FELL, TED LOOSED ONE FINAL BURST OF DEFIANCE FROM HIS TOMMY GUN.
AAGH!

AT THE SIGHT OF THEIR STRICKEN COMMANDER, THE NAZI CREW PANICKED.
ACH! THE LEUTNANT IS KAPUT!
OTTO, GET MOVING — SCHNELL! THERE MAY BE OTHER ENGLANDERS!
BELCHING FLAME FROM ITS EXHAUSTS, THE HUGE PANZER THUNDERED OFF INTO THE DARKNESS.

MICK HURRIED DOWN TO HIS FRIEND AND WITH FUMBLING, UNSKILLED HANDS APPLIED FIELD DRESSINGS TO THE UGLY WOUNDS. TED'S VOICE WAS NO MORE THAN A HUSKY WHISPER.
NO SECOND CHANCES IN THIS GAME, SON! MY MISTAKE — SHOULD HAVE CHECKED THOSE GRENADES. THEY WEREN'T PRIMED.
I'LL GET YOU BACK, TED... Y--YOU'LL BE ALL RIGHT...

Chapter 2. Death of a Friend

MEANWHILE, MORGAN, THE OTHER MEMBER OF THAT ILL-FATED PATROL, HAD FOUND HIS WAY BACK TO THE PLATOON. A STONY-FACED SERGEANT LISTENED TO HIS REPORT.
LIKE I WAS SAYING, SERGEANT, OLD BATCH TAKES ON THIS JERRY TANK ALL ON HIS OWN, SEE. YOUNG RUSSELL UPS AND HANDS HIM A COUPLE O' DUFF GRENADES AND POOR OLD TED COPS IT...

THE LOSS OF ANOTHER VETERAN WAS A HARD KNOCK FOR THE SERGEANT. BITTERNESS ETCHED THE LINES A LITTLE DEEPER INTO HIS FACE.
PUT YOUR REPORT INTO THE O.C TOMORROW. WHAT HAPPENED TO RUSSELL, OR WERE YOU TOO BUSY RUNNING TO NOTICE?
OH, I THINK HE TRIED TO MAKE A BOLT FOR IT. MAYBE THE JERRIES GOT HIM. IT ALL HAPPENED SO QUICK LIKE.

THE BATTALION STOOD-TO JUST BEFORE DAWN. IN A FORWARD POST, CORPORAL HEGAN STIFFENED AND PEERED FORWARD.
LOOK! JUST TO THE RIGHT O' THOSE BUSHES, PETE! SOMETHING'S MOVING!
HOLD YOUR FIRE, COKEY. IT AIN'T JERRIES...

THEY FOUND YOUNG MICK RUSSELL. LIKE SOME UNGAINLY CRAB, HE WAS STILL DRAGGING HIS LOAD THROUGH THE MUD. HIS GLAZED EYES DID NOT SEE THE KHAKI-CLAD LEGS THAT GATHERED ROUND HIM.
HANG ON, TED! IT CAN'T BE--- WE'LL--- GOT TO...
GOOD GRIEF! IT'S YOUNG RUSSELL!
HEY! STRETCHER PARTY AT THE DOUBLE!

GENTLY, THEY LIFTED THE YOUNGSTER ON TO A STRETCHER AND HE SANK INTO THE DEEP OBLIVION OF EXHAUSTED SLEEP. HE DID NOT HEAR THE INFINITE SADNESS IN THE CORPORAL'S WORDS.
TED MUST HAVE BOUGHT IT HOURS AGO! POOR KID. HE'S BEEN HUMPING A DEAD MAN ALL NIGHT.

IT WAS A WEEK BEFORE MICK WAS RELEASED FROM THE BASE HOSPITAL. BUT BY THEN CONTACT HAD BEEN MADE WITH THE MAIN GERMAN DEFENCES. FOR HOURS HE SEARCHED FOR HIS UNIT.
SEEN THE FOURTH QUEENS RIFLES ANYWHERE ?
AYE, LADDIE. 'BOUT TWO MILES UP AHEAD. JERRY'S GOT 'EM PINNED DOWN IN SOME WOODS. WATCH YOUR STEP!

INDIFFERENT TO THE VIOLENCE AROUND HIM, MICK WALKED ON UNTIL A BRAWNY ARM REACHED UP AND DRAGGED HIM INTO A BUNKER.
HEY! WHAT THE BLAZES...?
GET DOWN, YOU CLOT! YOU WON'T LAST FIVE MINUTES ABOVE GROUND.

WITH A SPINE-JARRING THUMP, MICK HAD REJOINED HIS PLATOON.
WOTCHER, MATE. YOU PICKED A NICE HEALTHY TIME TO COME VISITING.
HOPE YOU'RE IN GOOD SHAPE FOR A SCRAP. THE SARGE IS UP COMPANY H.Q. NOW GETTING ORDERS. WE'LL BE GOING IN TO KNOCK OUT THOSE JERRY GUNS SOON AS HE GETS BACK.

THEN THE BURLY FIGURE OF SERGEANT WATERFIELD DROPPED HEAVILY INTO THE TRENCH. FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, THE HARD LINES OF HIS FACE SOFTENED WHEN HE SAW WHO HAD JOINED THEM.
HELLO, YOUNG 'UN! GOOD TO SEE YOU BACK...

AS THEY CROUCHED ON THE START LINE, SHELLS OF THE SUPPORT FIRE SIGHED LAZILY OVERHEAD. THE SERGEANT WATCHED THE UPRAISED ARM OF THE OFFICER ...
SOON AS THEY LOB SMOKE OVER, WE GO IN. BOTTOM OF THE ESCARPMENT THERE'S A VIADUCT. THE JERRY GUNS ARE THE OTHER SIDE OF IT. OUR JOB IS TO NAIL 'EM. ANY QUESTIONS?
YEH, BASHER! CAN I HAVE FOURTEEN DAYS' LEAVE?

MICK FELT NO FEAR OF THE COMING ATTACK. THE ONE MAN WHO HAD SHOWN HIM THE WARMTH OF FRIENDSHIP WAS DEAD AND HE ALMOST HOPED AN END TO HIS OWN MISERY WAS WAITING FOR HIM.
DON'T LIKE THE LOOK O' YOUNG RUSSELL. KEEP AN EYE ON HIM, HEGAN.
OKAY-- HE TOOK IT PRETTY BAD ABOUT TED.
THE BARRAGE LIFTED. TIGHT-LIPPED, THEY LURCHED FORWARD INTO THE ATTACK.
LET'S GO, MEN... ADVANCE!
STUMBLING AND CURSING, THEY STARTED DOWN THE LONG SLIPPERY DESCENT. FROM THEIR FLANKS CAME THE HARSH BARK OF VICKERS GUNS. BELOW THEM, THE NAZI POSITIONS LAY, WREATHED IN SMOKE.
WATCH OUT, KID. THEY'RE ONLY WAITING FOR US TO GET WITHIN RANGE. WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTS, YOU STICK CLOSE WITH ME ... GOT IT?

THEY WERE HALF WAY DOWN THE TREACHEROUS SLOPE WHEN THE GERMAN GUNS MET THEM WITH A MURDEROUS GREETING. THE THIN LINES OF KHAKI-CLAD FIGURES WAVERED. ABOVE THE INFERNAL RACKET, WATERFIELD'S VOICE BELLOWED OUT, AND THEY SURGED ON.

ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE VALLEY, CONCEALED GERMAN MORTAR AND SPANDAU POSTS HAD ESCAPED THE SOFTENING UP BOMBARDMENT OF THE BRITISH TWENTY-FIVE POUNDERS. WITH UNLEASHED FURY, THEY REAPED A TERRIBLE HARVEST.

THEN THE INFANTRY WERE IN THE DEAD GROUND BELOW THE KILLING ZONE OF THE GERMAN GUNS.
DIG, MEN! IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE!
LOOK OUT! JERRIES!
WITH A FANATICAL ZEST, THE GERMAN STORM TROOPERS POURED FORWARD IN A SUICIDAL COUNTER-ATTACK.
A LACERATING FIRE SCYTHED INTO THE NAZI RANKS. ONLY A HANDFUL OF GERMANS SURVIVED TO CLASH IN THE WILD MELEE OF CLOSE QUARTER FIGHTING ...
VAGUELY, MICK HEARD HEGAN SCREAMING AN ORDER — BUT TERROR HELD HIM IN ITS PARALYSING GRIP.

MICK! FIRE, CURSE YOU, FIRE!
GET UP, RUSSELL! GET UP AND FIGHT!
THERE WAS NO TIME FOR PITY. WATERFIELD DRAGGED THE YOUNGSTER TO HIS FEET AND SLASHED A BACKHANDER ACROSS THE HYSTERICAL FACE.
UUGH!
FIGHT OR DIE! NO THANKS TO YOU, HEGAN DIDN'T BUY IT! YOU'VE GOT A GUN... FIRE IT!

SEEING THE FAILURE OF THE COUNTER-ATTACK, THE ENEMY COMMANDER DIRECTED THE MASSED FIRE OF A MACHINE GUN SECTION AT THE BRITISH POSITIONS.
THOSE DOGS REFUSE TO DIE! GET YOUR GUNS INTO ACTION, SCHNELL!
JAWOHL, HERR OBERST!

AGAIN THE BATTALION WAS PINNED DOWN.
LOOKS LIKE JERRY'S GOT US SEWN UP GOOD AND PROPER, SARGE! WE'RE TOO CLOSE IN TO CALL FOR AN ARTILLERY SHOOT.
IF ONLY WE COULD SNUFF THOSE M.G.s ON THE BRIDGE!
HERE! GIVE ME THE PIAT!

BEFORE THE SERGEANT COULD STOP HIM, HEGAN SNATCHED UP THE MISSILE PROJECTOR AND STARTED BACK UP THE ESCARPMENT.
HE'LL NEVER MAKE IT!
KEEP GOING, HEGAN! KEEP GOING!

CORPORAL HEGAN WAS ONLY FIFTY YARDS FROM THE LEDGE WHEN A LONG BURST FASTENED ON TO HIM.

IN HORRIFIED FASCINATION, MICK HAD WATCHED HEGAN'S GALLANT BUT FUTILE BID TO SAVE HIS COMRADES.
HEGAN! IF ONLY HE COULD HAVE...

SUDDENLY ONE OF THE INFANTRYMEN LOOKED ROUND.
PETE! THAT YOUNG KID--RUSSELL--HE'S CLEARING OUT.
LEAVE HIM, COKEY. PROBABLY GONE BOMB HAPPY! SLAM ANOTHER MAG ON THIS BREN.
UNENCUMBERED BY HEAVY EQUIPMENT, RUSSELL BOUNDED UP THE SLOPE LIKE A YOUNG ANTELOPE. HEAVY SLUGS TORE THE EARTH AROUND HIM, BUT HE NEVER LOOKED BACK.
MUST...MUST GET... THAT PIAT!

THE GERMAN FIRE WAS TAKING A DEADLY TOLL.
CAN'T LAST MUCH LONGER. THIS COULD BE WHERE WE BUY IT!
HEY, SARGE! DYLAN'S COPPED ONE. HE'S CALLING FOR YOU.

THE SERGEANT CRAWLED ACROSS TO WHERE THE LITTLE WELSHMAN LAY MORTALLY WOUNDED. THE LILTING VOICE WAS HARDLY MORE THAN A WHISPER.
DON'T SUPPOSE I'LL SEE THE OLD RHONDDA VALLEY AGAIN, SARGE. TELL YOUNG MICK THOSE GRENADES HE GAVE TO TED--MY FAULT...
GRENADES! WHAT ABOUT THOSE GRENADES?

I NEVER PRIMED THEM-- HEGAN TOLD ME TO. ALWAYS A LAZY SORT O' CUSS I WAS! WOULDN'T LIKE YOUNG MICK TO BLAME HIMSELF-- YOU TELL...
YES, I'LL TELL HIM.
THE VOICE TRAILED AWAY. FOR THE LITTLE BARRACK-ROOM LAWYER THE WAR WAS OVER.

THE SEARING PAIN OF A FLESH WOUND BURNED MICK'S SHOULDER, BUT HE HAD THE PIAT. THERE WAS A SMILE ON HIS FACE AS HE AIMED THE DEADLY WEAPON ACROSS THE VALLEY.
THIS IS IT THEN, TED! IT'S THE BEST I CAN DO...
WHERE'S THE KID -- YOUNG RUSSELL?
'E SCARPERED A FEW MINUTES BACK. LAST I SAW HE WAS GOING...
HEY! WHO THE DEVIL'S THAT?

AT THAT MOMENT, THE PIAT BOMB TORE A GAPING HOLE IN THE MASONRY OF THE VIADUCT AND A SPANDAU NEST DISINTEGRATED.
AAGH!

A RAGGED CHEER WENT UP FROM THE HARD-PRESSED INFANTRY AS ANOTHER BOMB SAILED OVER AND A SECOND NAZI GUN CUT SHORT.
GREAT SCOTT! IT'S THE KID FIRING THAT PIAT!

MINUTES LATER, WATERFIELD FLUNG HIMSELF DOWN BESIDE THE STARTLED YOUNG SOLDIER.
GREAT WORK, RUSSELL! LISTEN, LAD...THOMAS GOT HIT! 'FORE HE WENT, HE TOLD ME ABOUT THE GRENADES. HE SHOULD HAVE PRIMED THEM. D'YOU UNDERSTAND? IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT!
A MIST CLOUDED MICK'S VISION. HE GROPED FOR WORDS, BUT THEY WOULD NOT COME ...

THE SILENCING OF THE GERMAN GUNS WAS THE CHANCE THE VETERANS HAD BEEN AWAITING. WITH A ROAR, THE BRITISH LEAPED TO THEIR FEET AND SWEPT FORWARD...
CHARGE! FORWARD, ME LUCKY LADS!

THE GERMAN BASTION HAD BEEN BREACHED. NOTHING COULD CHECK THE WAVES OF KHAKI-CLAD MEN THAT WASHED OVER THE NAZI BATTERIES.
FIGHT BACK, YOU SCUM! FIGHT BACK!

ON THE HILLSIDE, THE SOUNDS OF FIRING SLOWLY DIED AWAY. ANOTHER DAY OF BATTLE WAS ENDING AND THE RANKS OF NUMBER THREE PLATOON HAD GROWN EVEN THINNER.
CHOCOLATE?
WELL--ER-- THANKS! IT'S BEEN QUITE A DAY.
SURE HAS. YOU'LL GET A MENTION IN DESPATCHES FOR WHAT YOU DID. BE SOMETHING TO TELL YOUR FOLKS BACK HOME.
EVEN IN THE FADING LIGHT, WATERFIELD SAW THE OLD SADNESS CREEP BACK ACROSS THE YOUNGSTER'S FACE ...
I'VE NO FOLKS. NOBODY GIVES A TINKER'S CUSS IF I'M DEAD OR ALIVE. COME TO THINK OF IT, I DON'T MUCH CARE MYSELF.
I SEE! COME ON, LET'S BE GETTING BACK WITH THE OTHERS.
AS THEY WALKED SLOWLY DOWN THE HILL, THE RUGGED SERGEANT PUT A PROPOSITION THAT TOOK MICK'S BREATH AWAY.
LOOK, MICK, THIS ROTTEN WAR CAN'T LAST MUCH LONGER. I'VE GOT A LITTLE GARAGE BACK HOME--IT'S ONLY SMALL, BUT I COULD USE AN EXTRA PAIR OF HANDS. YOU COULD LIVE IN WITH MY PEOPLE. THEY'D BE GLAD TO HAVE YOU. CARE TO HAVE THE JOB?
D'YOU--D'YOU REALLY MEAN THAT? IF ONLY I COULD.

IT HAD BEEN A GLORIOUS BUT TRAGIC DAY FOR THE BATTALION.
RECKON WE'VE DONE OUR SHARE THIS TIME, PETE. THINK THEY'LL SEND US BACK?
NOT A CHANCE, MATE! HI, JOHN, YOU LUCKY OLD SO AND SO -- YOU'VE STOPPED A BLIGHTY ONE THERE FOR SURE.
YEAH! I'M ON MY WAY BACK TO THE CASUALTY STATION NOW. TELL MICK THE SARGE WANTS HIM DOWN AT BATTALION H.Q. PRONTO. SO LONG, YOU BLOKES -- BE SEEING YOU!
SO JOHN ESDALE JOINED THE LONG TRAIL OF CASUALTIES MOVING BACK FROM THE FRONT LINE ...
JUST YOU, ME AND THE SARGE LEFT OUT O' THE WHOLE PLATOON, PETE. REMEMBER HOW HEGAN WAS SO SURE WE'D ALL MAKE IT TO BERLIN TOGETHER?
THERE'S STILL YOUNG MICKEY--HE'S ONE OF US NOW! PERHAPS HE'LL GET THERE. SOMEHOW I'VE GOT A HUNCH WE'VE NEARLY SHOT OUR BOLT, COKEY.

Chapter 3. Veteran

BEFORE MICK COULD GATHER HIS BEWILDERED THOUGHTS, THE COLONEL HAD SHAKEN HIS HAND, SERGEANT WATERFIELD HAD BARKED AN ORDER, AND THEY WERE ONCE AGAIN OUTSIDE.
A CORPORAL! ME! I CAN'T...
YES, YOU CAN, LAD! YOU'LL BE ALL RIGHT!

THE CRACKS WERE WIDENING IN THE WALLS OF THE NAZI FORTRESS AS THE RING OF ALLIED STEEL CLOSED UPON IT. BUT THE ENEMY FOUGHT NOW LIKE A CORNERED BEAST, HIS FEARSOME NEW WEAPONS STRIKING AT MILITARY AND CIVILIAN TARGETS INDISCRIMINATELY.
FEUER!

THE ALLIED ARMIES MUSTERED BEFORE THE DARK, SWIFT-FLOWING WATERS OF THE RHINE. THEY HAD NO ILLUSIONS ABOUT THE BATTLE AHEAD — IT WOULD BE MORE BITTER, MORE SAVAGE THAN ANY THAT HAD GONE BEFORE.
MP

IN THE SPEARHEAD FORCE WAS NUMBER THREE PLATOON, NOW FIFTEEN MEN STRONG AND WITH A NEW CORPORAL, WAITING QUIETLY FOR ZERO HOUR.
THIS WON'T BE A PICNIC! BUT WE'LL GET GUNNER SUPPORT FOR THE CROSSING AND AIR COVER AT FIRST LIGHT. ONCE WE HIT THE OTHER BANK, COME OUT SHOOTING BUT LISTEN FOR MY ORDERS AT ALL TIMES.

MICK WAS FILLED WITH A COLD APPREHENSION. THE FEAR OF FAILING THOSE VETERANS AROUND HIM HELD MORE TERROR THAN THE HUNGRY GUNS ACROSS THE RIVER.
C'MON, MICK. THIS RIDE'S FOR FREE.
COKEY SAW THE SWEAT GLISTEN ON THE YOUNG CORPORAL'S FACE AND PUT A COMFORTING HAND ON HIS SHOULDER.
OLD BASHER WILL GET US THROUGH, MICK. YOU'LL SEE!
S'RIGHT ENOUGH. NEVER SEEN THE SARGE LOSE HIS HEAD YET!
THEN A RED VEREY LIGHT STAINED THE NIGHT SKY. FROM BEHIND THEM, HEAVY ARTILLERY OPENED UP AND THE UNGAINLY ARMADA ROLLED FORWARD INTO THE WATER.
HELLO, DOG ROGER ONE. FIRST ASSAULT WAVE GOING IN NOW...
AS THE RANGE SHORTENED, THE BARK OF RIFLES AND THE NERVE-SHATTERING THUD OF HEAVY CALIBRE M.G.s JOINED THE UNHOLY DIN OF BATTLE.

THE GERMAN DEFENCES WERE THICK AND HEAVY. THE FIRST MEN ASHORE, HELD UP BY BARBED WIRE ENTANGLEMENTS, WERE CUT DOWN IN DROVES.
GET THE SAPPERS UP WITH THE BANGALORES! WE'VE GOT TO GET THROUGH THIS WIRE.
THE AMPHIBIOUS D.U.K.W. CARRYING NO.3 PLATOON PILED ON TO THE HOSTILE BANK. SERGEANT WATERFIELD ROARED A COMMAND AND THE MEN FLUNG THEMSELVES INTO THE INFERNO.
COME ON, THREE PLATOON! SPREAD OUT AND HIT THE DIRT!

AT LAST, MEAGRE GAPS WERE TORN IN THE BARBED WIRE AND THE IMPLACABLE VOICE OF THE SERGEANT WRENCHED HIS MEN TO THEIR FEET AND DROVE THEM FORWARD.
CORPORAL RUSSELL, COAKLEY! GET THROUGH THERE AND COVER US WITH THE BREN. GO! GO!

IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE, MICK FOUND HIS COURAGE FLOWING BACK INTO HIS VEINS. A LETHAL SPRAY HOSED FROM HIS L.M.G. AS HE RAN.
KEEP COMING, COKEY! HAVE THOSE FRESH MAGS READY!
RIGHT WITH YOU, SON!

THEY FLUNG THEMSELVES DOWN INTO A SHELL HOLE. BEHIND THEM, CAME THE VOICE OF SERGEANT WATERFIELD LIKE THE ANGRY BELLOW OF A BULL.
FORWARD, THREE! GO! GO!

THE GRIM CONTOURS OF A PILLBOX BLOCKED THEIR PATH, ITS GAPING SLITS SPITTING OUT A SAVAGE INVITATION OF DEATH. BUT THE SERGEANT WAS A MASTER CRAFTSMAN OF HIS DEADLY TRADE.
RAPID FIRE! PREPARE TO ADVANCE!
WITH DEADLY ACCURACY, THE GRENADE ARCHED TOWARDS THE ENEMY STRONGPOINT.

A HIDEOUS GLOW ILLUMINATED THE INTERIOR OF THE PILLBOX AND THERE WAS A MUFFLED ROAR. THE GUNS CUT OFF ABRUPTLY.
GET INTO THEM, LADS!
WE'RE WITH YOU, BASHER!

THE GERMANS WERE FIGHTING NOW WITH THE DESPERATION OF CORNERED RATS. AGAIN MICK SAW FIELD GREY UNIFORMS LOOM THROUGH THE ACRID SMOKE. BUT NOW HE WAS BAPTISED TO THE TERROR OF BATTLE.
MY TURN NOW, JERRY!

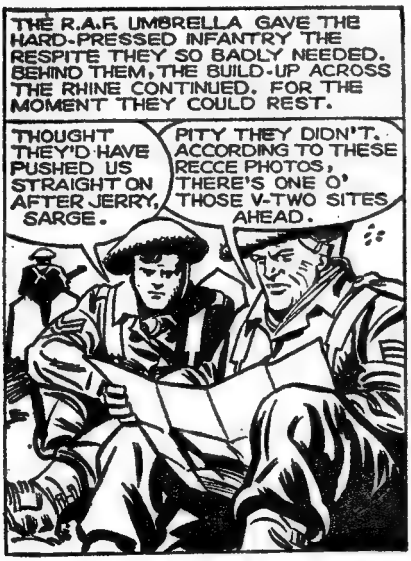
FOR PETE EVERETT AND COKEY IT WAS THE SAME ORDEAL THEY HAD ENDURED FOR THREE LONG BITTER YEARS. BLEAK-EYED, THEY STORMED INTO THE GREY TIDE.
WATCH IT ON YOUR FLANK, COKEY!
OKAY, CHUM~~ I'VE GOT HIM!

THE GERMAN LINE BROKE AND RAN.
NICE GOING, MICK— CEASE FIRE! EXTENDED LINE! PREPARE TO ADVANCE!
THEY STUMBLED THROUGH THE CHOKING DUST THAT CLOAKED AN ANTI-TANK DEFENCE LINE. THEN THE WALKIE-TALKIE CRACKLED AND THE SERGEANT YELLED AN ORDER.
THIS IS AS FAR AS WE GO, MEN! GET UP ON THE RIDGE AND DIG IN!
AS THE SHOVELS AND ENTRENCHING TOOLS BIT INTO THE HARD GROUND, THEY HEARD THE FIRST OMINOUS RUMBLING OF APPROACHING ARMOUR.
LISTEN! I CAN HEAR TRACKS GRINDING. IT MUST BE...
FULL MARKS, SON! THOSE ARE PANZERS — AND BIG 'UNS, BY THE SOUND OF IT. STAND TO!

MEN WAITED TENSELY AS THE UGLY BULK OF THE STEEL MONSTERS LOOMED OUT OF THE PALE DAWN LIGHT. THE FIRST H.E. SHELLS BURST IN FRONT OF THE BRITISH POSITIONS.
DON'T PANIC! KEEP YOUR NAPPERS DOWN. THEN GO FOR THEIR TRACKS WITH GRENADES!

THE ARMOURED COUNTER-ATTACK OF THE GERMANS CAME IN WITH THE DAWN. BUT R.A.F. ROCKET TYPHOONS ARRIVED AT THE SAME TIME.
ACHTUNG! ENGLANDER AIRCRAFT!

THE FIGHTERS SCREAMED INTO THE ATTACK, THEIR ROCKETS STREAKING DOWN WITH DEVASTATING EFFECT ON THE NAZI ARMOUR.
BY GOLLY! NEVER BEEN SO GLAD TO SEE THE FLY BOYS SHOW UP!


THE R.A.F. UMBRELLA GAVE THE HARD-PRESSED INFANTRY THE RESPITE THEY SO BADLY NEEDED. BEHIND THEM, THE BUILD-UP ACROS THE RHINE CONTINUED. FOR THE MOMENT THEY COULD REST.
THOUGHT THEY'D HAVE PUSHED US STRAIGHT ON AFTER JERRY, SARGE.
PITY THEY DIDN'T. ACCORDING TO THESE RECCE PHOTOS, THERE'S ONE O' THOSE V-TWO SITES AHEAD.

THEN THE RATION TRUCK ARRIVED.
GET YOUR MESS TINS OUT, LADS. GRUB UP!
PERSONAL MESSAGE FOR YOU, SARGE. SORRY IT'S BEEN DELAYED.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, MICK NOTICED THE SERGEANT CLIMBING STIFFLY UP THE STEEP SLOPE. THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAY HE MOVED THAT MADE THE YOUNG CORPORAL UNEASY.
HEY, SARGE! WHERE THE HECK'S HE GOING?
NOT TO WORRY. HE'LL BE BACK. JUST GONE TO TAKE A NOSE ROUND OUT FRONT MOST-LIKE.

A PUFF OF WIND BROUGHT A SCRAP OF PAPER FLUTTERING TO PETE EVERETT'S FEET. HE WAS JUST ABOUT TO KICK IT TO ONE SIDE WHEN THE NAME ON IT CAUGHT HIS EYE.
IT'S TO OLD BASHER! GOOD GRIEF!
WHAT'S UP? WHAT DOES IT SAY?

MICK SCANNED THE MESSAGE TWICE BEFORE THE FULL IMPACT OF THE COLD PRINTED WORDS REGISTERED.

CP/395 SGT. WATERFIELD

IT IS WITH DEEP REGRET WE MUST INFORM YOU THAT YOUR NEXT OF KIN DID NOT SURVIVE WHEN YOUR GARAGE AND HOUSE RECEIVED A DIRECT HIT FROM AN ENEMY ROCKET.

FOR SOME MOMENTS THE MEN STOOD IN AWKWARD SILENCE. THEN THE DEEP-THROATED ROAR OF AN ENGINE SPRINGING TO LIFE CUT ACROSS THEIR THOUGHTS.

THEY FLUNG THEMSELVES UP THE SLOPE. A BATTERED NAZI TANK WAS LURCHING WILDLY AWAY ACROSS COUNTRY.

BASHER'S IN THAT TANK! *BASHER! COME BACK!*

SAVE YOUR BREATH, MICK. THERE'S NOTHING GOING TO STOP HIM NOW.

THE SERGEANT SAT AT THE CONTROLS OF THE CRAZILY SWAYING TANK, BLACK HATRED FILLING HIS BRAIN. HE LAUGHED MIRTHLESSLY AT HIS DEAD COMPANION.

YOU CAN'T HEAR ME, KAMERAD, BUT I'LL TAKE A FEW MORE OF YOUR KIND WITH ME WHERE I'M GOING.

MEANWHILE, MICK HAD RACED TO THE RATION TRUCK AND HAD FLUNG HIMSELF INTO THE DRIVING SEAT.
WHAT THE DEVIL?

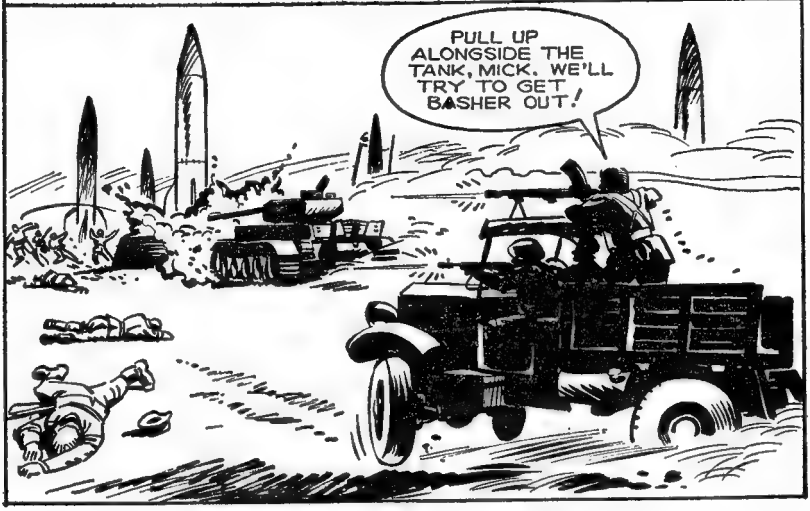
PETE AND COKEY SAW HIM COMING AND LOOKED AT EACH OTHER...
WOULDN'T BE THE SAME WITHOUT 'OLD BASHER...
GOT TO REACH THE END O' THE ROAD SOME TIME, ME OLD CHINA. COME ON!
AS THE VEHICLE STORMED PAST THE TWO MEN, THEY LEAPT ABOARD.

DURING THOSE LAST FEW DAYS, THE GERMANS HAD DOUBLED AND REDOUBLED THEIR FIRING RATE OF V-2 ROCKETS. NOW THE FINAL SALVOES WERE ABOUT TO BE LAUNCHED BEFORE THE SITE WAS EVACUATED.
FASTER, YOU CLUMSY DOGS!
HERR KOMMANDANT! THERE IS A PANZER APPROACHING!

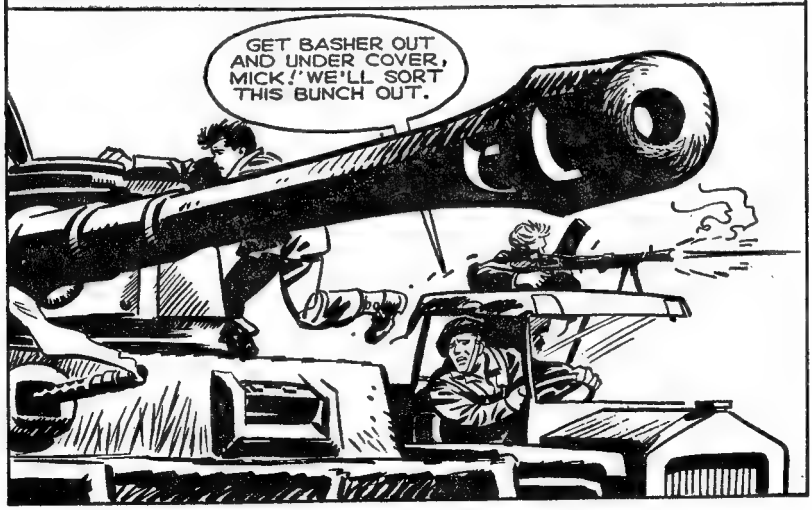
IN THE CONFINES OF THE STEEL HULL, SERGEANT WATERFIELD HAD MOVED THE DEAD GERMAN TO THE CONTROLS, HIS LIFELESS FOOT WEDGED ON THE THROTTLE. THEN THE SERGEANT SLID BEHIND THE MACHINE GUN.
YOU'RE DOING FINE, FRITZ! JUST KEEP HER GOING!

TOO LATE, THE GERMANS REALISED THE HOSTILE INTENT OF THE PANZER THAT CAREERED TOWARDS THEM.
RUN, COMRADES... AAAAGH!

A STICK GRENADE SHATTERED THE TRACKS OF THE RENEGADE TANK, JUST AS MICK AND HIS COMRADES ROARED INTO THE ENEMY SITE.



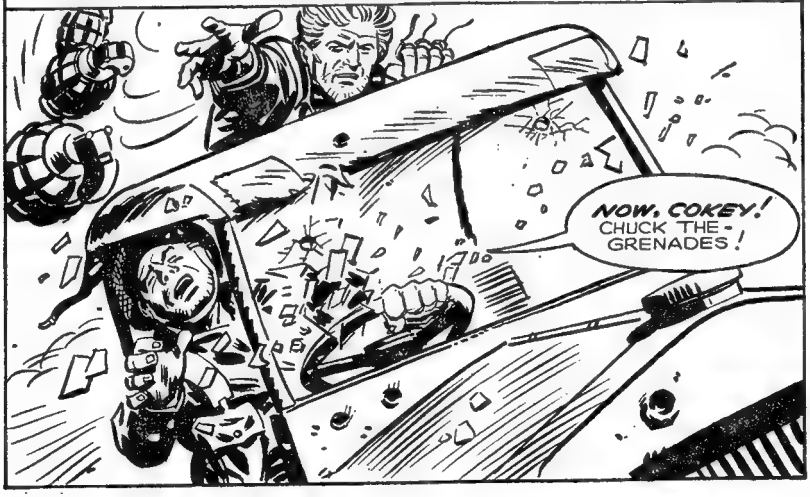
THE TRUCK SCREECHED TO A STANDSTILL BESIDE THE STRICKEN TANK. MICK TOOK A FLYING LEAP ON TO THE ARMOUR PLATING...



WITH A SUPREME EFFORT, MICK DRAGGED THE LIMP BODY OF THE SERGEANT TO THE SHELTER OF A NEARBY CONCRETE BUNKER. HE HAD BEEN SEVERELY WOUNDED IN THE ARM.

PETE AND COKEY IN THE TRUCK WERE BLAZING A TRAIL OF DEVASTATION INTO THE HEART OF THE LAUNCHING SITE.

THEN HEAVY MAUSER SLUGS PINNED PETE TO THE BACK OF THE SEAT, BUT HE HELD THE BUCKING VEHICLE ON COURSE. THE MALIGNANT BULK OF THE ROCKETS LOOMED UP THROUGH THE SHATTERED SCREEN.



IN THAT LAST FLEETING MOMENT, BEFORE THE TRUCK SMASHED HOME, COAKLEY HURLED GRENADE AFTER GRENADE.
WE DID IT, PETE!
A RENDING CRASH OF BUCKLING STEEL MINGLED WITH THE BURSTING GRENADES. THEN THE ROCKET BLEW UP!
TRIGGERED OFF BY THE EXPLODING WARHEAD, THE WHOLE NAZI ARSENAL ERUPTED IN A CHAIN OF TUMULTUOUS EXPLOSIONS.

THE LAST THUNDEROUS ECHO DIED AWAY AND MICK DRAGGED HIMSELF OVER TO THE HALF BURIED BODY OF THE SERGEANT. A SOB OF RELIEF BROKE FROM HIS CRACKED LIPS...
I--I THOUGHT YOU'D BOUGHT IT, SARGE. PETE AND COKEY--THEY--THEY DID THAT!
THEY WERE GREAT LADS, SON--LIKE ALL OF YOU!

WHEN THE FIRST BRITISH UNITS REACHED THE BURNED-OUT SITE, MICK SAID GOODBYE TO THE RUGGED SERGEANT THE GERMANS COULD NOT KILL.
BY THE TIME YOU'RE DEMOBBED I'LL HAVE THE OLD GARAGE GOING AGAIN, MICK, AND I'LL BE NEEDING A BIT O' HELP WITH A DICKY ARM. I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU, PARTNER. LOOK AFTER YOURSELF!
I WILL, BASH--I'LL REMEMBER WHAT YOU TAUGHT ME!

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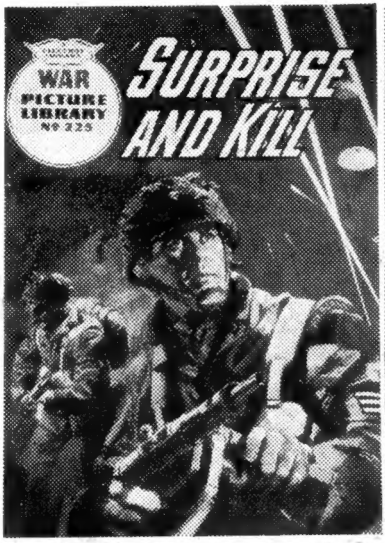

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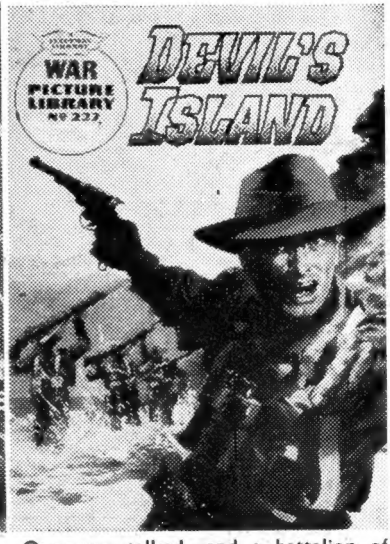

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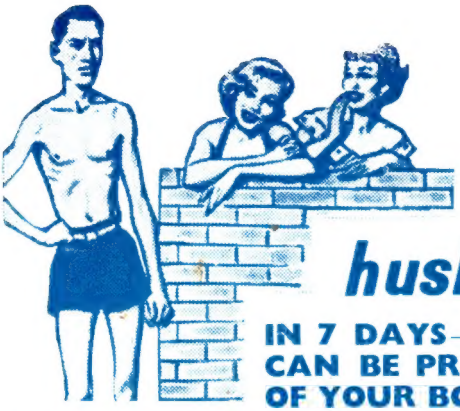

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